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AUTHOR Anderman, Eric M.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This study utilized a sociocultural approach to writing instruction and examined its effects on the motivation of students with learning disabilities. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development was used to measure changes in five third and fourth grade students' motivation toward literacy activities. Students wrote in journals daily and participated in weekly "feedback" sessions, where they read their stories to the teacher and other students. Data indicated that journal writing became more communicative over time, as children spent more time writing stories and letters rather than lists. Data also showed increases in creativity, a broader understanding of the uses of writing, greater persistence at writing tasks, and more conventional uses of writing over the course of the academic year. As journal writing was always a "free" writing activity (students were never told what topics to write about), the paper contends that the students' continuing desire to write, as well as the development of their writing abilities, is a result of the sociocultural/emergent literacy curriculum. Students did not receive any formal instruction in writing; thus, changes are attributed to the new meaning children constructed for writing, through their interactions with other members of the classroom writing community. A sample of one student's writing is included. (JDD)

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The Zone of Proximal Development as the Context for Motivation

Eric M. Anderman, Andrea Parecki, &
Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar

The University of Michigan
Combined Program in Education & Psychology

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, Georgia, April, 1993. Address all correspondence to Eric M. Anderman, Combined Program in Education and Psychology, 1400C School of Education, 610 E. University, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 48109. Special thanks to Laura Klenk and Amy Wilson for their assistance in this research.

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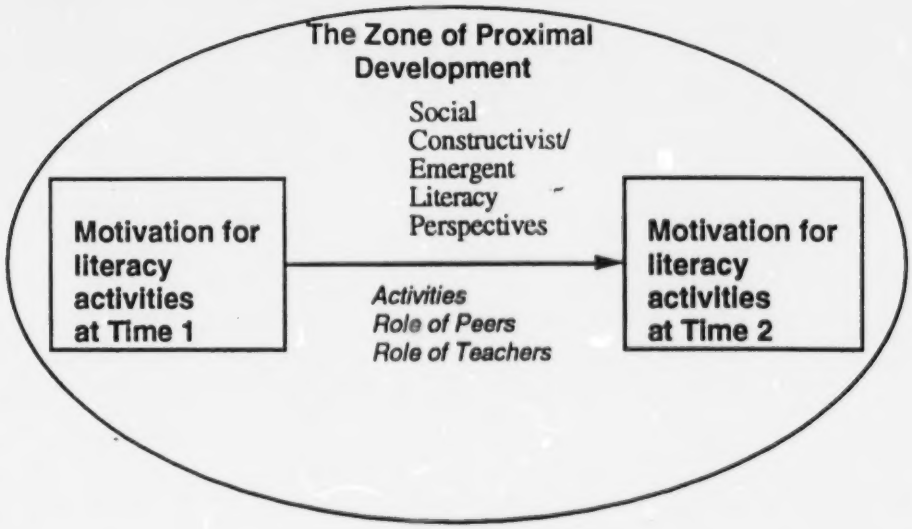
DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH AGENDA

This paper examines the effects of providing learning disabled children with opportunities to write in meaningful situations. While research of this nature has examined outcomes such as achievement gains and changes in use of cognitive strategies, motivation is seldom considered as an outcome. The present research addresses the effects of utilizing a sociocultural approach to writing instruction on the motivation of students with learning disabilities.

We initially attempted to study changes in these students' motivation toward writing using more traditional measures, such as goals, self-efficacy, attributions, expectancies, and values. However, data from these traditional measures failed to mirror the affective and cognitive changes that we observed in the children's writing. Consequently, we present various sources of data which evidence these changes.

THE MODEL

Our goal is to describe the psychological contexts that can be used to improve instruction and learning for special education students, and consequently increase student motivation. We used Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the Zone of Proximal Development, or "ZPD," which is the distance between what children are capable of learning independently, compared with what they are capable of learning in collaboration with adults or more experienced peers, as a guide in scaffolding the nature of writing opportunities for the students. We suggest that zones of proximal development, as informed by social constructivist and emergent literacy perspectives, serve as an appropriate and useful context for measuring changes in student motivation toward literacy activities. Our model is presented below:


The Zone of Proximal Development
Social Constructivist/ Emergent Literacy Perspectives
Motivation for literacy activities at Time 1
Activities
Role of Peers
Role of Teachers
Motivation for literacy activities at Time 2

Key Aspects of Model

- Use of emergent literacy and social constructivist perspectives in the literacy curriculum.
- Use of feedback sessions, in which students share their stories and exchange feedback.
- Students may write about any topics of interest.
- Any and all forms of writing are treated as meaningful and acceptable forms of communication.

HYPOTHESIZED OUTCOMES OF EMERGENT LITERACY/SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH TO WRITING

The meaningful interactions among students and the teacher will lead to

-creativity

-increased motivation

-an understanding of the art and craft of writing.

When viewed through the lens of both social constructivist and emergent literacy theories, the processes underlying changes in motivation become equally, if not more important, than the products or final outcomes.

METHODS

The students come from a self-contained special education classroom. Descriptions of students for whom we have ample data are presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Description of Students

Name of Student	Age	Grade	Ethnicity
James	9	3	Caucasian
Gary	9	4	Caucasian
Shannon	9	4	Caucasian
Carolyn	9	3	African-Amer.
Gregg	10	4	Caucasian

Using an emergent literacy perspective, where any and all forms of written communication are considered meaningful, we studied students' daily free-write journals, and weekly feedback sessions, for an entire school year.

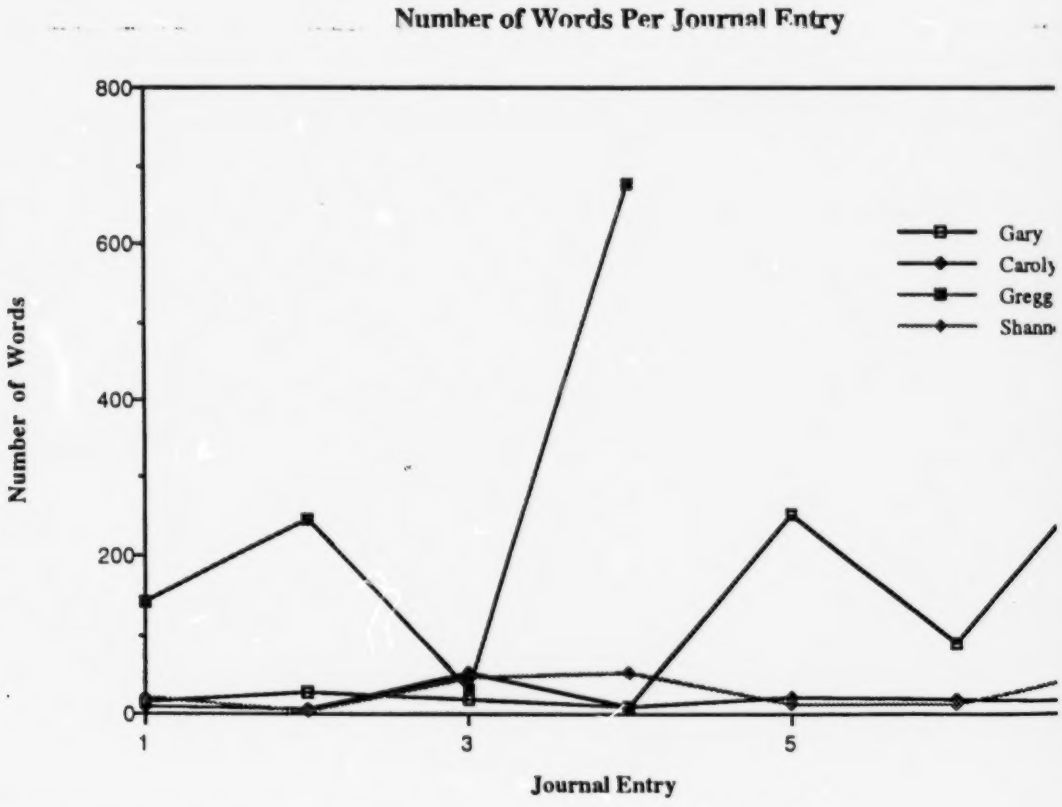
Each Friday, the students participated in a "feedback" session, where they would sit in the "author's chair" and read their stories to the teacher and other students. The students and the teacher questioned each other about the stories. Thus the peers (and occasionally the teacher) served as the "more experienced other" in the ZPD. Students almost always

incorporated their classmates' ideas and suggestions into their future writing. These questions often motivated students to persist at writing a given story.

RESULTS

The data presented in this paper represent samples of actual student writing from these journals. Figure 1 shows the changes in the quantity of words used within individual journal entries over time. Note that only one half of the students showed increases in productivity over time. Yet word count alone is not the only measure of motivation, and we cannot assume that this index itself is a valid indicator of motivational change.

Figure 1: Words Per Topic Entry For Each Student



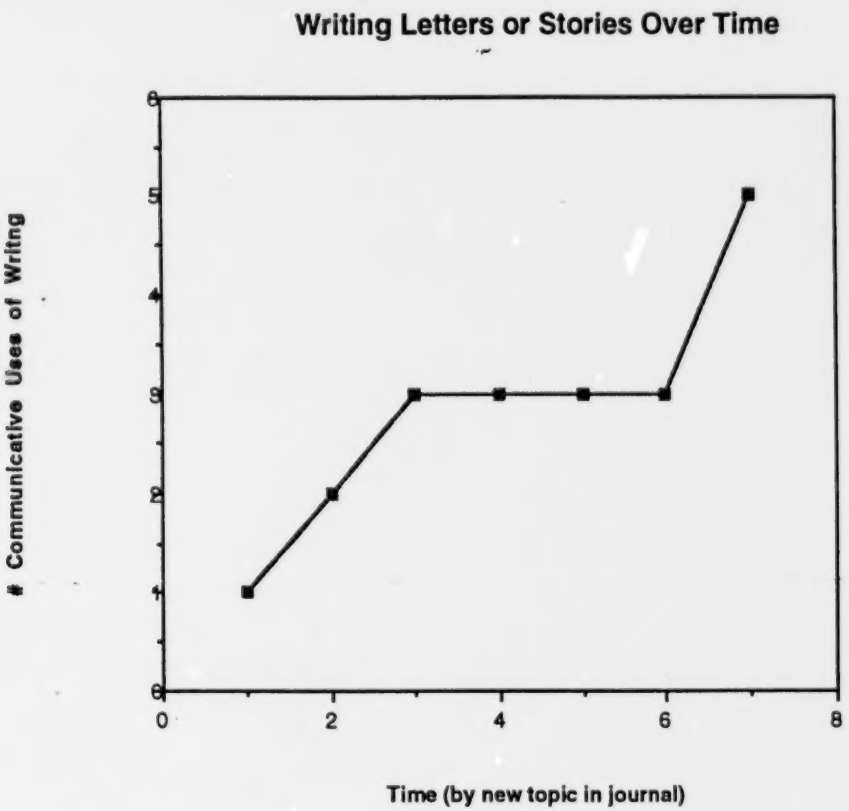
It is particularly important to examine changes in the types of writing that children produce (Wells, Chang, & Maher, 1992). In our sample, we noticed changes in the types of writing that children produced over time. These changes in writing were in response to other students' comments during the feedback sessions. We coded the students' general entries, attempting to categorize the types of writing. These data are presented in Table 2:

Table 2: Actual Uses for Writing

Student	*Use 1*	*Use 2*	*Use 3*	*Use 4*	*Use 5*	*Use 6*	*Use 7*
Gary	List	About life events.	General information.	General information.	Story	Story	Story
Carolyn	List	About life events.	About life events.	Letter	List	About life events.	Letter
Shannon	About life events.	List	About life events.	General information.	About life events.	About life events.	Letter
James	List	General information	Story	About life events	About life events	About life events	Story

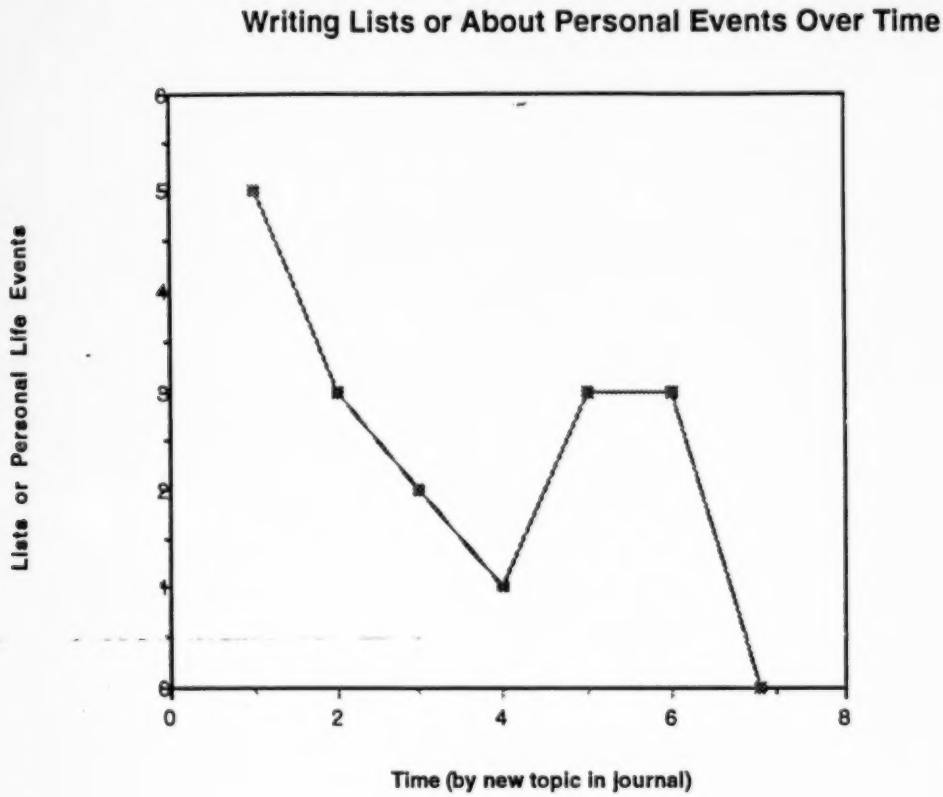
Journal writing became more communicative over time. The children spent more time writing in communicative forms of expression, such as writing stories and letters. The frequency of communicative writing (stories or letters) per journal entry for the first seven entries is displayed in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Frequency of Stories or Letters Over Time



We also found that as students began to find personal meaning and use for writing, their use of less sophisticated writing forms, such as "lists," dwindled. These data are displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Frequency of Stories or Letters Over Time



We had the opportunity to interview some of these students during the spring of 1991, prior to their entry into our program of research. Subtle changes are apparent in the meanings that children construct for writing. For example, one of the students named Carolyn spoke about the structural forms of writing in 1991 ("French writing"), but referred to writing in more communicative ways in 1992 ("We do our journals.")

Table 3: Comparison of Responses: What is writing?

Student	1991	1992
Gary	Writing is writing.	Use a pencil to write on a paper -- lead makes scratch leaving lead behind.
Carolyn	French writing... (means cursive)... The papers like the papers have -- newspapers -- have French writing.	We do our journals. When we write we practice writing and read it for feedback like go to the pool.
Shannon	Handwriting... when you can't get your work done goes you got to write your poem and your name page 4 times.	Helps get good.
James	Things that you want to learn; anything you need to.	Writing is making words and stuff, and drawing.

We also asked the students why people use writing. The responses in 1992 show that the students have developed much more mature conceptions of why people use writing:

Table 4: Comparison of Responses: Why do we use writing?

Student	Spring 1991	Spring 1992
Gary	I don't know.	So you don't waste part of earth -- letters instead of phones.
Carolyn	You want to learn, graduate. *[Learn about what?]* Where you get grown folks.	Helps us do something... if we get bored when we go on vacation I practice writing.
Shannon	To help you learn how to write in cursive.	To do homework.
James	You don't want to write it wrong.	To do stuff... we need it for stuff to do.

We asked the children to describe the kinds of writing that they do in school. In 1992, the students offer much richer responses than they do in 1991. In particular, they refer to other academic subject areas (math, spelling, etc.) as acts of writing in 1992:

Table 5: What Kinds of Writing Do You Do At School?

Student	1991	1992
Gary	Work writing.	Spelling, math, drill, reading, PA, journal, draw pictures, at recess for a punishment.
Carolyn	Fresh writing, like my name, like that (points to chalkboard).	Math -- get answers right. I love when I get A+.
Shannon	Handwriting, seatwork books, ABC papers, name pages, colors.	My friend Amy and stepmom Cary
James	Seatwork, coloring.	I do journals to write a story, spelling words -- trying to spell right, do a plot -- sometimes pictures with the plot. Also sometimes you can make pictures in stories.

Finally, we asked the students to describe what a good writer does. Again, most changes are subtle at best, but when taken in conjunction with the students' writing samples and the changes in the quality of writing, the responses support the notion that aspects of motivation toward writing have changed:

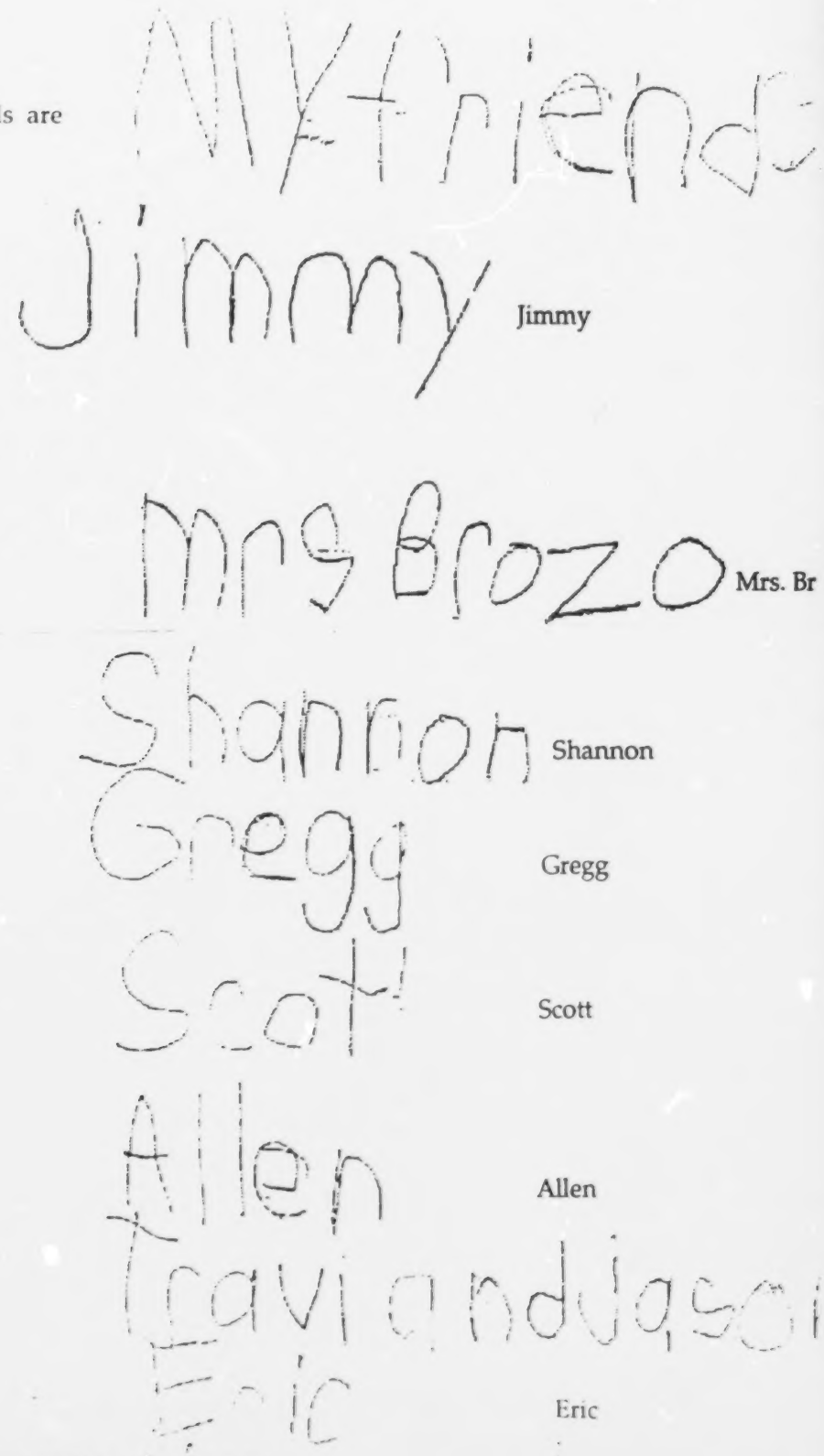
Table 6: What does a good writer do?

Student	1991 - Why is s/he a good writer?	1992 - What does a good writer do?
Gary	Because I see their poem.	Writes books and stuff -- painting and writes a sentence. Like a painting of the sun caption -- "the sun is out."
Carolyn	Mrs. R -- Cause she can write in cursive.	Write on a line real straight, no mess up or nothing. A book report, draw.
Shannon	Danielle -- cause she write better than me. Cause I slower.	He writes Bo Bunny, got a girlfriend, named Becky -- he shows pictures.
James	Mrs. Ryan -- is a good writer because she never wants to be screwed up on that part.	Do good pictures.

A Sample of Student Writing

Below we present a writing sample from one of the students ("Gary"). Gary had been in special education settings for most of his years in school. When he began the present school year, he only knew how to write lists of words. Previously, he had not had the opportunity to engage in any free, creative writing activities; all of his writing experiences involved handwriting exercises and copying of text. Below we present an example of one of Gary's first journal entries:

My friends are



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This is typical of most of the early written products from the students in this classroom -- when given the opportunity to write, they would typically copy words. As the year progressed, and the children shared their stories, ideas, and thoughts about writing, all of them learned to use writing for communicative purposes, such as to write stories or letters. Below we present a sample of Gary's writing from later in the year, when he was writing stories. The story, called "Sam in the Haunted Mansion," displays many of the qualities of sophisticated writers, including sentence structure, a title, use of descriptors, and sentence structure. Recall that the students did not receive any formal instruction in writing -- we suggest that these changes in Gary's writing are due to the new meaning that he has constructed for writing, through his interactions with other members of the classroom writing community.

Sam In The Haunted Mansion

Sam in The haunted mansion

One day a man named

one day a man Name

Sam was walking

Sam was woki

through the haunted

throo The Ha

forest

Forist

Then he saw

that he saw

a big mansion

a Big mansion

it was a haunted

it was a haun

mansion

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DISCUSSION

We contend that motivation in the special education classroom is more than the sum of its parts -- in fact, we believe that there is more to "motivation" than measures of time on task, attributions, goals, and efficacy, since these traditional measures did not reflect the observed changes in writing. Our sociocultural approach to writing instruction allows for a more comprehensive picture of changes in motivation across time.

Data from the students show increases in creativity, a broader understanding of the uses of writing, greater persistence at writing tasks, and more conventional uses of writing over the course of an academic year. These changes are most probably not merely "developmental" changes, since the children, who were in the third and fourth grade, never had written conventionally before, and received no other type of writing instruction.

While we initially attempted to use more traditional motivational measures, such as efficacy, goals, and attributions, we discovered that such measures did not mirror the changes in student writing that we observed. Since journal writing was always a "free" writing activity (students never were told what topics to write about), we contend that the students' continuing desire to write, as well as the development of their writing abilities, is a result of the sociocultural/emergent literacy curriculum, similar to the concept of "continuing motivation" (Maehr, 1976) or a task or mastery-focused goal orientation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Midgley, in press; Nicholls, 1989). We also have evidence from work in other special education settings which suggests that the use of such a curriculum is not always conducive to improved student writing and motivation -- in fact, when these activities are treated as "add ons" to the standard curriculum, they may indeed have no effect at all (Anderman, Parecki, & Palincsar, 1992). Future research should expand the use of such methods with other learning disabled populations, as well as with normally achieving children.

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